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Laughter and Humor 101

Why Laughter and Humor Blossom in Preadolescence

Children ages 4 to 11 learn the intricate rules of social engagement.

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✓ Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



KEY POINTS

- We know that what we find amusing changes as we grow from infant to adult. A new theory of laughter can help us understand why.
- In our preadolescent years, we learn through informal play and formal instruction the “rules” by which our society operates.
- When these rules and norms go unheeded, reaching our goals becomes more difficult, and laughter helps express our shared vulnerabilities.

Of the many reasons we have changing sensibilities when it comes to laughter and humor, our stage of maturity is among the most significant. Having discussed the [laughter of toddlers](#) in my last post, here I submit some personal observations on how the sense of humor of preadolescent children expands in scope and complexity.

The Laughter and Humor of Preadolescence

Preadolescent children, roughly aged 4 to 11, continue to develop life skills through play, but play which is increasingly structured, and often involving adult supervision. These youngsters are beginning to compete with others of comparable age and ability in organized contests with established rules. Because rules tend to reduce the role of chance, preadolescents are more accurately assessing their own talents relative to their age-mates. They are assessing decision-making skills and leadership potential, and



Source: Ketut Subiyanto/Pexels

beginning to establish their place within a dominance hierarchy that may remain substantially intact throughout childhood. They are comparing their abilities to those in their immediate circle of friends, but also—through verbal communication—those with whom they don't directly compete. For good or ill, successes and failures are more frequently public with ever greater social

consequence.

In contrast to younger children, parents and older family members now take on the role of instructors as much as caregivers—in some cases withholding consideration until a particular lesson has been learned. Unrelated adults, too, may take on predominantly educational roles with only transient supervisory responsibilities. This requires preadolescents to be ever mindful of how their actions, and the actions of cohorts, will gain the favor or disfavor of adults. Abilities like attentiveness to direction, verbal comprehension and communication, and the ability to emulate adult behavior will be closely monitored during this stage, with failures more likely to be understood as vulnerabilities or, in extreme cases, deficiencies.

Preadolescence is a period of rapid development

With increased experience comes the added awareness of norms as defined by parents, family members, friends, and other cultural influences. Preadolescents develop a sense of

what level of physical strength or agility, for example, are typical for different age groups and thus perceive substandard performances as signs of vulnerability.

The same is true of emotional and cognitive abilities. Emotional outbursts or, conversely, failure to reach an appropriate level of emotional expression, might be of little consequence to infants or toddlers, but they begin to play an important role in how preadolescents relate to peers and mentors.

Cognitive shortfalls, unrecognized by younger children, will be recognized by preadolescents. As children gain a fuller understanding of how things work, they attain a greater sense of how others' actions might or might not meet with success. They become more able to anticipate the consequences of a given action, and thus better able to identify limitations.

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In the social realm particularly, preadolescents are beginning to acquire the interpersonal strategies that often stay with them for life—how they relate to mentors, friends, and other children of both lesser or greater ability. They're deciding how faithfully they will abide by rules set down by others, as well as which traits and abilities they will most value as individuals. As a result, they will have a better idea of how a given shortcoming might compromise good working relationships. One trait is a particularly noteworthy example of this advancing ability: Preadolescents are beginning to master the fine art of deception.



Source: Andrea Piacquadio/Pexels

The propensity to deceive others is often considered to be an undesirable trait, and in many circumstances this is certainly true. But some degree of deception is an integral part of our humanity. We all recognize the value of the “little white lie,” for example, in smoothing out rough spots in everyday social

interactions. For their part, preadolescents increasingly appreciate the consequences of lies. They become better at distinguishing truth from fiction, at understanding the difference between courtesy lies and malevolent trickery, and at predicting the potential dangers of complicated, multiple-party deceptions should the truth be ultimately revealed. (This is a rather complex topic as it relates to humor, for which I’ll provide a more in-depth treatment in coming posts.)

Closely related to deception is the practice of withholding information. Preadolescents are more adept at recognizing the value of holding onto information, as well as how its release might compromise success. They understand the need for modesty, to keep secrets, to hide opinions, and to suppress one’s feelings of fear, inadequacy, or envy. Letting someone see true feelings or overhear true intent can be interpreted as a sign of vulnerability—the boy, for example, who can’t help but become flustered and tongue-tied when the cutest girl in his class is near.

Preadolescents come to appreciate the ways in which such traits make their own and others’ objectives become harder to reach—how authority should and should not be challenged, how friendships can and cannot be tested, and how rules may and may not be bent. As such, their view of what does and does not constitute vulnerability—which lies at

the heart of the [Mutual Vulnerability Theory of Laughter](#)—is necessarily more sophisticated than when they were younger. With this conceptual model, we come as close as possible to a full understanding of why our sense of humor matures, just as we do, with each passing year.

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About the Author



[John Charles Simon](#) speaks, writes, and consults on a range of topics, including laughter, humor, their origins and evolution, and the central role each plays in our lives.